THE STORY OF A MANUSCRIPT

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Henry H. Harper.

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By
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Henry H. Harper
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WHEN I came into earthly existence, upwards of a hundred years ago, the conditions attending my birth were so unauspicious that for many months I lay about the house, shivering in my swaddling-clothes, in mortal fear that I should never be attired in a suitable garb for my appearance in public. During this time my careworn progenitor often took me up and beamed affectionately upon me; sometimes he was alone and occasionally in the company of one or more others — generally strangers — who always complimented me to his face, but usually regarded me with a distrustful frown when his back was turned.

Once during my long period of inertia a woman who belonged to the household came and dragged me ruthlessly from my nestling place and after staring disdainfully at me a few minutes she turned away with a sneer,

grumbling something about my having cost more time and effort than I was worth. I wondered in silence what business it was of hers how much labor I had cost or what I was worth, since she had contributed nothing toward my existence except to rant noisily about the house and make caustic comments on the valuable time that was being wasted upon me. Indeed so persistent was she in her dislike for me in the slow and toilsome process of my evolution, that I was in constant terror of being birth-marked by her baleful influence. During the frequent interruptions caused by her frowns and scoldings, my fond parent would sometimes look compassionately down upon me and plead in my defence that some day or other I should find a friendly lodgment in the bosom of an apppreciative generation.

"Yes, after we have all starved to death!" was the spiteful rejoinder.

"Well," said he hopefully, at the conclusion of a long-drawn sigh, "then our descendants will reap the reward of our labors. We shall at least find a grain of comfort in knowing that we have given the world the

best that was in us to give, and that in so doing we have built a castle in which our spirit and our memory will find a permanent abiding-place on earth. A good book never dies, and by its helpful influence in the world our memory will always be kept green."

"Speak for yourself alone!" she retorted with a sniff. "As for me, I would be clothed and fed now while I live in the flesh, and leave posterity to contend for itself. Let each generation look to its own literary dreamers – I warrant you there will always be enough of them."

"Great heavens!" thought I — "Must I go on living forever in a world so unappreciative as to let my progenitor languish from starvation and neglect! Must he needs die, that I may live! A doleful prospect indeed!"

"This child of my brain," he continued with patient forbearance, looking down at me, "has a mission in life, and doubtful though it may seem to our contemporaries, the time will surely come when it will ably attest the wisdom of its birth."

"Far more likely it will be still-born and find a secure resting-place amid the dust of oblivion — long before you do," she said snappishly.

At this acrid remark a sudden look of pain and resentment darkened his countenance and he seemed on the point of paying her back in her own coin, when on looking down at me his features relaxed and he answered her softly, —

"Well, my dear, however much your remark hurts me I can scarcely blame you for your skepticism, seeing how ill my previous efforts have fared in meriting — or rather in not meeting with — public approbation. We have been happy in each other's love, and God forbid that after all these years we should quarrel over a trifling difference of opinion."

Whereupon she came up to him and encircling his neck with her arms she gave me an unwonted look of tenderness, then stooped and kissed him fondly. "Forgive me," she said, "you know I didn't mean it."

That night as he sat meditatively viewing me under the dim candle-light I thought I

detected a desponding tear in his eye, then, as if to comfort his unpromising child, he folded his arms tenderly across my body and resting his head upon them, there followed a long and impressive silence during which I was conscious of an occasional tremor vibrating upon his muscles.

For a long time after this I was laid away, and had to give place to what they called more superficial work, in which quicker and larger returns were to be reaped; and at length after I had accumulated a liberal coat of dust, which smelled painfully like oblivion, I was about to despair of ever being "brought out," when one night I was tenderly rescued by a familiar hand and laid beneath the candle light in my accustomed place on the old desk. Day after day from that time on I underwent the torture of being cut and pasted in various places, and scratched and interlined in others, until at the end of a month I was scarcely able to recognize my old self either in looks or in feelings. At length, however, my new parts, after the manner of a set of false teeth, began to adjust themselves and crowd out

the discomforts they had at first produced, and on becoming a little more reconciled to my embattled appearance, after my numerous wounds began to heal I realized that I was much stronger than before.

After this frightful operation I was laid away, where I slept in unbroken quietude for a long time, until I was once more brought forth and laid beneath the familiar candle. Fearing that something had again gone wrong with my internal organs I was greatly alarmed lest I should have to undergo another painful operation; but this time I escaped with a few perfunctory stabs and scratches, then I was bundled up and sent off—I knew not where. On being unwrapped and exposed to the light I found myself amid strange surroundings. In due time I was laid out on a dissecting table beneath the unfriendly gaze of a crabbed-looking old man armed with one of those sharp-pointed weapons with which my interior parts had been so unmercifully punctured and repaired at home; and having fared so badly in parental hands I trembled in anticipation of the fate that awaited me at the

mercy of this unfeeling barbarian. However, my evil forebodings came to nothing of consequence, and after enduring his scowls and sniffs while he looked me over indifferently I was again wrapped up and shipped off, and the next time I saw daylight I was back home again!

My reception at home was a sadly disappointing affair to all concerned. On entering the house, before I was unwrapped my covering was penetrated by a familiar feminine voice calling out—

"Oh dearie! your prodigal has returned!"

But no "fatted calf" awaited me there, and no friendly smile greeted my homecoming. Even my own parent in whose abiding faith I was but little short of perfection, in whose doting eyes I had hitherto detected no traces of reproof—not even when he corrected my faults—now stared at me with a strange, disappointed look and turned sadly away as if I had proved unfaithful to him. I wanted to cry out that I was still his loyal child; that if given the opportunity I would prove to the world that I was all and even more than he had claimed for me; but my

voice was still and could not be heard. I was as one in a trance — conscious of everything happening in the room, but incapable of expressing the appalling fear of being buried alive. The woman commiserated with him and led him away as she cast a forbidding glance at me, as much as to accuse me of being the author of all his woes; whereas, he was in fact the author of all mine.

For several days I lay neglected and alone in a drawer of the old desk where I had been carelessly tossed. Thereafter everything seemed unusually quiet about the place; the voices were hushed, and somehow I had a vague feeling that my parent had fallen seriously ill. The consciousness of being despised and forsaken had been sufficiently intolerable, but the fear that disappointment over me had broken my parent's spirit, and that I might never again behold his face or claim his blessing was indeed painful to bear. He had called me his favorite child and he had lavished his fondest affections upon me; he had set his hopes upon my popularity; he had breathed his own undying spirit into

my soul, and I was the embodiment of his noblest and maturest thoughts. I was looked upon by him as the hope and support of his declining days; the one master effort of his life, upon which he had worked intermittently for many years and in which he rested his claim for posterior renown. To sink with him now into the dark recesses of perpetual oblivion was enough; but that it should fall to my unhappy lot to hasten him there; and that, too, without receiving his final absolution; to be singled out as the obstacle upon which his ambitions were wrecked, and be forever accused as the one great disappointment that consigned him to an untimely grave! It was awful!

Late one night when all was dark and still a creaky noise issued from the loose boards in the old floor, and verily it seemed as if the Messenger of Death had entered that house of despond. I lay quietly in my berth, not daring to move, when presently the drawer was slowly opened and there gazing down at me out of tear-dimmed eyes sat the emaciated spectral form of my maker! With a feeble hand he drew me forth

and pressing me to his bosom he bowed his head and bemoaned the misdirected efforts of a hard-spent life!

"My poor rejected child of misfortune!" he cried; "Thou art invested with the one great purpose of my life — thee have I endowed with all I have that is worthy to impart; and in rejecting thee, the world hath also rejected me. For what, then, should I continue to live on in this fast decaying shell, with my hope and spirit both gone — carried amiss in thy bosom.

"Yet thou art as I made thee — just as I would have thee. I would not change thee one iota, even to make thee popular with the masses, for then thou wouldst go forth as a false messenger, bearing an ephemeral torch. But thou, whatever thy imperfections, art my true emissary, and upon thee I bestow my last blessing. Some day, in some generation, mayhap, they will take thee up and heed thy silent voice, and then with majestic tread thou wilt bear my message echoing on through the ages to come. God bless thee, and preserve thee from destruction!"

This final benediction was uttered with upturned face, and laying me gently away he closed and locked my tomb-like compartment and I beheld his face no more. Thus I settled — a neglected orphan — into a comatose state, to await the resurrection day!

Sometime later, when the "dust of oblivion" — that direful sentence! — had formed itself into a generous cloak about me, this outer garment was rudely shaken to pieces one day when my sepulchre was dragged from its resting place, then tumbled into some sort of a chariot and wheeled away, with me standing squarely on my head! From the rumbling noise outside it appeared as if the final trumpet had been sounded and all were hastening to the judgment bar. But the "streets of gold" did not appear to be as smooth as they are pictured in religious lore; and the "golden chariot" seemed to be equipped with four wheels, instead of two. It all seemed so strange! If some kind soul had only set me aright, and opened my dusty, suffocating tomb, that I might behold what manner of beings I was among!

At length we halted and I was brought

down with a tremendous thump! But at last I was landed right side up again. After that all was quiet for what seemed like several days, as time was measured before the resurrection. The stillness was finally broken by a loud gnawing sound, seemingly in the compartment just overhead. It grew louder and louder; it seemed to approach nearer and nearer! What could it mean! Maybe some one having discovered my absence had come to deliver me! At length the crumblings from the boards above began to fall on me; then the fiery eyes of what seemed like a huge monster appeared at the opening and glared through at me! Again it set to gnawing at the aperture, with redoubled energy! Finally it squeezed through and immediately planting itself on top of me began to devour my oilskin coat off my very back! "Horrors! It's a rat! In heaven there are no rats—I must be in—the other place! Help! help!"

In the course of a few days, after several visits from this marauder, my outside garment was completely eaten away, except that portion which lay underneath me, and no

one coming to release me from my prison I began to chafe under the melancholy prospect of remaining forever locked up and forgotten. The spirit of my maker, still wide awake within me, seemed to cry out for light and recognition; for contact with some object of kindred understanding, and this, coupled with my extreme anxiety to be out viewing my new surroundings, made my close confinement the more irksome. Finding that sleep was the only comforting diversion in which I could indulge my profundity I soon became addicted to it, and abandoning all hope of being liberated I eventually resigned myself completely to its allurements; at least until I should — if ever — be brought into contact with something more sensitive to my voice than the wooden walls that immured me from the world, or from heaven, or from— wherever I was.

Just as I was dozing off into the soporific realms there was a great commotion about the place; bells were jangling outside and men were running to and fro, shouting their commands, and general pandemonium seemed to be rampant. My worst fears re-

garding the region to which I had been consigned were soon confirmed, when my little room began to fill with a mal-odorous smoke that threatened to suffocate me. Verily it seemed that my earthly troubles had all followed me here and there was no escaping everlasting perdition. But soon the noise abated and the smoke gradually grew less dense, until at length the atmosphere became quite tolerable; then I again betook myself to sleep.

In this death-like trance I must have passed months and years, until one day I was a little disturbed by something tugging away at the drawer in which I lay. Whether it was the dawning of another judgment day, or what, I couldn't tell; but presently the drawer was pulled out and behold, the gloom of perpetual night was quickly dispelled by the light of day! And there, gazing down at me with curious eyes, stood a great bewhiskered hobgoblin in the image of a man, of much the same stature and appearance as the men of earth.

"Hello! What's this?" he exclaimed in my native tongue, and dragging me out he

glanced me over, his eyes bulging with astonishment.

Heavens! I was back on earth again! What joy I should find in now undertaking the mission for which my creator had designed me — in breathing his living spirit, his thoughts, his words into the souls and understandings of a new generation!

"The lost manuscript!" exclaimed the man, as he scrutinized my interior parts through a glass that made his eye look as big as an apple.

"A veritable message from the tomb!" And catching me up he rushed out of the room, down the stairs and out onto the street.

I was indeed on my own native English soil. In due time we arrived at our destination, a room where there was a desk with many papers scattered about. On entering he turned and locked the door, then with me still snugly tucked under his arm, he went into a large iron vault and took out some sheets of paper, yellow with age. Laying them down beside me he looked back and forth from one to the other, occasionally

nodding his head with a look of grave satisfaction. That night two other men came in, and as they stood with gloating eyes and wide-open mouths, my discoverer fumbled me over and expatiated upon me. The group was soon augmented to five — all sombre looking literary critics — and they all continued to gaze wonderingly at me, then at one another, until I was induced to wonder if after all I hadn't hailed from some other sphere; or if not, what generation of mortals had now resurrected me! I had certainly undergone no perceptible physical transition, and then, too, my language appeared to be even more intelligible to them than it had been to those of my own era.

The man who found me read my thoughts aloud and with dramatic impressiveness expounded them to the others, whose faces, as they nodded comprehendingly one to another, assumed looks of wisdom that would have made Solomon look like a gaping idiot.

"His greatest masterpiece!" exclaimed one. "Most extraordinary!" said another. "Marvelous profundity! The greatest find of the age!" declared a third.

The reading of various selections continued for some time, until two of the company — perhaps being more or less susceptible to a sort of vaporization of the somniferous atmosphere in which I had so long reposed, and of which I had seemingly absorbed some part — fell into a sound sleep.

"How wonderfully smooth and philosophical!" remarked one of the slumberers in all seriousness on being suddenly waked by a nudge in his mid-section just as the reader finished a long recondite passage, the purport of which even I myself had not the faintest idea. They were of one accord in admitting that such powerful arguments were not to be questioned!

"Why, the logical deductions are simply unanswerable!" observed the reader with a flourish of his hand at the end of the next passage; at which the other four nodded — but not exactly in unison.

Heretofore I had supposed from what my parent said that I was his only child, but this conceit was now taken out of me on learning from the conversation of these men that I was only one of a considerable family.

I was not, however, denied the distinction of being regarded as the most learned member of the family group. But I was somewhat puzzled by the paradoxical statement of one of these sages, that I appeared to be both the youngest and the eldest. Perhaps he meant to imply that my inception was among the first and my completion among the last labors of my maker.

A few days later one of my ears was tagged with an unheard of price — so startling that my progenitor's consort would surely have turned over, had it been whispered near her resting place. Indeed I confess that it made me feel like a blue ribbon winner at a prize contest; for after that, when people came to view me their look of curiosity was invariably changed to one of amazement on observing the significant badge designating my pecuniary worth. Even if my literary value had borne only the slightest relation to the price put upon me, I thought my early contemporaries who rejected me must have been a short-sighted lot.

"Too bad," remarked a kind-faced old

lady, "that the poor man couldn't have lived to enjoy some part of his present fame."

"Let us console ourselves," replied her philosophic companion, "with the thought that had he lived to enjoy his greatest fame he might possibly have degenerated into a conceitedass, as popular idols sometimes do."

Just then along came a man and gathering me up, he remarked something about someone having cabled for me "from across the water."

"Just like those greedy Americans!" exclaimed a by-stander; "they're forever corralling our choicest treasures."

Long ago I had heard certain vague whisperings that far-off America was inhabited by tribes of Indians and gangs of puritanic barbarians and revolutionists; and the thought of being uprooted from my native soil and sent over there to be stared at by those unlettered savages was highly disturbing. However, I managed to console myself with the thought that it was no worse than being sent to the Cannibal Islands; and then, too, I indulged the hope that someday I might find my way back home.

From the great care with which I was wrapped and sealed I thought it must be a long journey to America; though in reality it proved to be only a short jaunt. I slept most of the way across and on arriving there the most prodigious surprise was in store for me.

When I was opened up, instead of finding myself in a wigwam I was luxuriously quartered in the library of a great private mansion; and lo! as I looked about I met the gaze of my doting ancestor who looked benignly down at me from a lofty position he occupied on the library wall!

The master of the house handled me as if in fear that I should fall to pieces. He was a stern-looking man with a sad face, and seemed to have a good heart. The other members of the family regarded me with oblique glances, perhaps with the feeling that my cost was widely out of proportion to my worth. However, this did not much disturb me, for my foster parent had remarked to friends that he would have considered himself lucky in getting me at double the figure that was set upon me; and whatever

they may have thought, they all agreed with him that he was exceedingly fortunate.

After a time it was decided that I should make a grand début, and for this occasion I was taken into a massive institution with marble walls and frescoed ceilings, where I was given a great public reception, which was attended by well-dressed, intelligent looking people who crowded about and gazed admiringly at me. From the familiarity with which they talked of my earthly creator it appeared as if his name was a household word; indeed it was often remarked among them that he was more widely known and appreciated in America than in the land of his nativity!

In due time I had my photograph taken, and singularly enough the scars from my old wounds which I had always regarded as imperfections in my physiognomy were so far from being treated as blemishes that in the estimation of my new admirers they were looked upon as emblems of honorable distinction, and worthy of reproduction.

After being photographed I was attired

in a smug new frock, and carefully transcribed by a comely young lady who kept continually casting side glances at me as she worked away, with me lying nearby. However, nothing came of this affair, and perhaps it was just as well, for I never felt that we quite understood each other. Every night during this process of transcription the young lady used to put me carefully away in a fireproof compartment where I slept—secure from rats!

Newspaper reporters and bespectacled college professors often came to view me, and while some of them looked dubious, the great majority seemed satisfied with my authenticity, if not with my abstruse doctrines. After the various ceremonies attending my welcome in this foreign land were over, and when all who wished had examined and discussed my character, I was laid away for what I hoped would be a good long sleep, but in a short while I was again hauled out for comparison with certain portions of my printed counterpart which for some reason were not regarded as easily comprehensible. However, no one seemed willing to assume

the responsibility of changing me, and not once was my skin even scratched.

To my great horror, this printed copy they had made of me was bedecked inside with several full-page photographs of the very worst looking parts of my anatomy — all scratched and interlined, and written criss-cross through the center and around the edges — as if to insult me by calling special attention to my ugliness! Little did I suspect when I sat up proudly to have my picture taken that it was to be employed in heaping such indignities upon me!

My resentment was somewhat softened, however, when a well-dressed, scholarly looking gentleman who stood close by examining one of those hideous photographs, remarked that while the printed pages were in themselves beautiful yet they were cold, spiritless and unfeeling as compared with the warmth and intimate human qualities that radiated from my irregular lines. "Those laborious alterations," said he, "attest the great care with which the author selected his phrases; and through them one can trace the various turns of his imagina-

tion before his ideas were finally rounded out and perfected. All of this interesting mass of data with many of the writer's individual traits are of course lost in the printed page."

A few years later my foster parent died without having made any provision respecting me in his will, and since his money-geting propensities appeared to be the prevailing characteristics with which his descendants were endowed, they packed up many of his choicest library treasures and shipped them off to the auction room. I was on the point of being included with these and sold into bondage with the rest, but I was spared that ignominy by the timely intervention of a group of persons of more laudable instincts who made up a purse of fabulous size and purchased my freedom, together with transportation back home.

My mission in America having been fulfilled, my long cherished hope of returning again to the humble cottage of my ancestor was now to be realized! Moved by the most praiseworthy sentiments these noble citizens of the land of my adoption procured

my emancipation and sent me back home; yes, to the very room in which I took earthly form! Even my old familiar desk had been restored to its accustomed place, with most of the other furnishings and relics which long ago had been scattered to the four winds. There, too, I found many of my kindred happily re-united under the old paternal roof. And behold, from the wall above the old desk the life-like image of the father of the family smiled down upon the joyful assemblage! Yet some people say that we have no feeling, — no sentiments!

May the blessings of the One that controls the destinies of all men and manuscripts forever abide with those who contributed toward this happy reunion!